

Going Native – Rethinking Plant Selection for the Home Landscape



WHAT ARE NATIVE PLANTS, NON-NATIVE PLANTS, AND WEEDS?

Native plants are plants that have evolved over hundreds or thousands of years in a particular region. They have adapted to the geography, hydrology and climate of the region and to the other species of plants and animals inhabiting the region. As a result, native plants are part of a community that provides habitat (food and shelter) for a variety of native wildlife species such as songbirds and butterflies. Native plants, when used in home landscaping, provide the ecological benefits of supporting local wildlife while requiring minimal maintenance due to their adaptation to local climate and soil conditions.

Non-native plants (also called invasive or exotic plants) are plants that have been introduced into an ecosystem in which they did not evolve. Some of these plants are introduced deliberately, as with our many exotic landscaping plants. Others are introduced accidentally, through the spread of seed by wildlife or by their inadvertent inclusion in seed mixes being sent from one area of the world to another. Some of these introduced, non-native plant species do not grow well in their new environment or do not reproduce easily so they are easily controlled and pose no threat to the native ecosystem. Other introduced species find their new home much to their liking and reproduce prolifically, even in natural, minimally managed landscapes. These aggressive, or invasive plants often have no natural enemies or controls to limit their spread. Invasive non-native plant species can be a serious threat to native plants and

communities, out-competing local species for available sunlight, water and nutrients, and do not provide the wildlife habitat benefits of the plants they replace.

Weeds are plants that are growing in places where they are not wanted. Both native and nonnative plants can become weeds in a managed landscape like a garden or agricultural field. Nonnative species tend to become invasive weeds in natural landscapes due to the lack of natural controls.

HOW CAN USING NATIVE PLANTS HELP THE ENVIRONMENT?

Landscaping with native plants has many positive factors that relate to conservation landscaping and to sustainable landscapes.

- Native plants save energy. Native plants have evolved and adapted to local conditions. They are vigorous and hardy, able to survive winter cold and summer heat. Once established, they require little or no irrigation or fertilization. They are resistant to local pests and diseases. Thus, native plants suit today's interest in "low-maintenance" gardening and landscaping.
- Native plants stay put. Native species are members of a community that includes other plants, animals and microorganisms. A natural balance keeps each species in check, allowing it to thrive in suitable conditions but preventing it from running amok. Native species rarely become invasive unless a major disturbance disrupts the natural balance of the community.
- Native plants support the local ecosystem. Native plants provide food and shelter for birds, butterflies and other desirable wildlife.
- Native plants are interesting. The diversity of native plants includes interesting flowers and foliage. Native trees and shrubs provide a variety of heights, shapes, and textures in the landscape. Many provide winter interest with their bark or seedpods. Native plants also have historical and cultural interest. Some of these plants played a significant role in Native American culture or in European exploration and settlement of the continent. Many species have value as food or medicine. Others have been used for rope and twine, fabrics and dyes, and other domestic purposes. Native plants provide the people of today with a tangible link to the past.

HOW CAN I BEGIN LANDSCAPING WITH NATIVE PLANTS?

If you are planning a landscape on an undeveloped lot, first examine the existing plants to determine which habitat type you will be working within. Identify native trees and shrubs and see how many could be incorporated into your new landscape. Protecting existing native plants in a new landscape reduces the number of plants to be purchased and provides an instant "mature landscape". Also identify invasive species for removal to prevent future problems. In an existing landscape, replace plants that are lost to disease or storm damage with native species. Lists of native and invasive plant species, and books and pamphlets describing how to use them in home landscaping, are available from a number of sources. As the natural landscape is developed, a general decline in both plant and wildlife habitat diversity occurs, leading to an overall decline in many species and a population explosion of "pest" species best suited to backyard living (including squirrels, house sparrows, and white-tailed deer). To help offset this loss, consider planting native trees, shrubs and perennials around your home and yard.

To learn more or report possible illegal discharges to the storm drain system, call the Village of Lake Bluff at 847-234-0774.

(Source: Clean Water Fact Sheet, produced by NEMO and Sea Grant Connecticut)